

CHAPTER XIX: CRISSY FIELD¹

During the two decades of peace following World War I, a major development occurred at the Presidio of San Francisco with the establishment of a military airfield, Crissy Field.

Kill Devil Hill, near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, received little public attention on December 17, 1903, when Orville and Wilbur Wright separately made the first-ever, sustained, and almost-controlled flights on the flying machine *Flyer*. Four years later the U.S. Army established a three-man Aeronautical Division in the Signal Corps (one man soon went AWOL). The Wrights delivered a flying machine to the Army's Fort Myer, Virginia, in December 1907. Demonstration flights had barely got underway in September 1908 when the aircraft crashed severely injuring Orville Wright and killing Army Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge, Coast Artillery Corps.²

The Wrights delivered a second machine to Fort Myer in 1909 but it too crashed. Nevertheless, in 1911 the U.S. Congress appropriated \$125,000 for military aviation. Among the first entrants to the Wright Flying School at Dayton, Ohio, to qualify as a pilot was a young lieutenant named Henry H. Arnold. About the same time that Arnold won his wings, the Army's chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood, who had been the Presidio's assistant post surgeon in 1890, wrote, "It may be one year, it may be more, but sooner or later the aeroplane will be the greatest factor of the century in the world's affairs."³

A few months after Wood made that prophecy, an air show held at Selfridge Field (Tanforan raceway) in South San Francisco demonstrated eloquently the rapid advances being made in flight. Aviator Eugene Ely made history by flying from the field in a Curtiss airplane and successfully landing on a platform on naval cruiser USS *Pennsylvania*, then returning to the field. A Presidio coast artilleryman, Lt. Myron

1. This account on Crissy Field is based primarily on Stephen A. Haller, *The Last Word in Airfields, A Special History Study of Crissy Field, Presidio of San Francisco, California* (San Francisco: National Park Service, 1994). Historian Haller's study is the definitive history of Crissy Field and this chapter is quite indebted to it.

2. A graduate of Lowell High School, San Francisco, Selfridge was the first man killed in a heavier than air powered crash. He had graduated from West Point in 1903, a classmate of Douglas MacArthur. The site of an air meet near San Francisco in 1911 was temporarily named in his honor. A coastal gun battery in Hawaii and a USAF base in Michigan are also named for him.

3. Hagedorn, *Wood*, 2:100, citing the *New York World*, August 2, 1910.

Crissy, also made history when he released two bombs from a Wright biplane when flying from 550 feet. Another Presidio officer, Lt. Paul W. Beck, then on detached service to Glenn Curtiss' flying school at San Diego, successfully sent a wireless message from an aircraft to Selfridge Field two miles away. Brig. Gen. Tasker H. Bliss, commanding the Department of California, attended the air show and declared it "the dawn of a new era in military strategy."⁴

In 1914, just days before World War I began in Europe, the U.S. Congress approved the creation of the Aviation Section in the Signal Corps setting its strength at sixty officers and 260 other ranks. When the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, the Aviation Section had 131 officers and 1,087 enlisted men, but fewer than 250 airplanes. Wartime growth resulted in the establishment of the U.S. Army Air Service in August 1918. By the end of the war it had a strength of 200,000 personnel; after demobilization, only 10,000 men remained by June 1920. The Army Reorganization Act of 1920 made the Air Service a combatant arm of the U.S. Army, along with the Infantry, Field Artillery, Coast Artillery, and Cavalry.⁵

At San Francisco during the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915, aviation events thrilled spectators and stimulated interest in flying, although still considered a dangerous activity. In the lower Presidio the exposition erected an oval racetrack, the center of which serving as an aviation field, and a large spectator grandstand. Dare-devil pilots performed trick flying and heart-stopping stunts over San Francisco Bay. The most famous of these daring young men was the native son Lincoln Beachey, the first American to perform the loop the loop. On one occasion he flew inside the incomplete Palace of Industry only to crash into the far end wall. (He was not hurt.) Later, he met the same fate as many of his compatriots when he crashed to his death in San Francisco Bay.⁶

4. Svanevik and Burgett, "Aviation Revolution," *The Times*, November 1 and 8, 1991; Paul W. Beck, "The Doves of War," *Sunset Magazine* (March 1911), pp. 292-296 (both articles brought to my attention by Haller); Alfred Goldberg, editor, *A History of the United States Air Force, 1907-1957* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1957), pp. 4-6. The 2d Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, from the Presidio attended the meet, January 6-24, in connection with military experiments. Among the officers was Lt. Delos Emmons who later commanded Crissy Field. Two months earlier Ely had succeeded in flying a plane off a specially constructed launching deck on cruiser *Birmingham*. Potter, *Illustrated History*, pp. 132-133.

5. Mondey, *Pictorial*, pp. 13-25.

6. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. vi and 10; Margot Patterson Doss, "San Francisco at Your Feet, Daring Aviators of the Presidio," *Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, July 14, 1968.

In July 1918 while war raged in Europe, the U.S. Congress authorized the construction of eight "air coast defense stations" in the United States whose purpose was to cooperate with the Coast Artillery in defending America's harbors, including magnificent San Francisco Bay. Only two stations realized completion, one on the Atlantic Coast, Miller Field in New York, and one on the Pacific Coast, Crissy Field at the Presidio of San Francisco. In the summer of 1919 a board of army officers at San Francisco recommended the west end of the lower Presidio as the site for the new field. Airplanes were already landing there, including the three aircraft assigned to the Western Department headquarters at the Presidio.⁷

At that time the commander of the Western Department, Lt. Gen. Hunter Liggett, although nearing the end of a lengthy army career, maintained a strong interest in aerial navigation. Now that he was adding another flying field to his command, he also assigned an air officer to his headquarters staff. Col. Henry H. Arnold, known to all as "Hap," received orders transferring him from Rockwell Field in San Diego to San Francisco's Santa Fe Building that housed the headquarters staff. He arrived in May 1919.⁸

The lower Presidio hosted the "First Transcontinental Reliability and Endurance Test" in December 1919 even before the Army began the development of the field. Forty-six aircraft flew from Roosevelt Field, Long Island, across the country toward San Francisco. At the same time fifteen planes led by Lt. Lowell

7. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 13-14.

8. Henry Arnold had already established a remarkable record for himself. One of the very first army officers to become a pilot, he had graduated from West Point in 1907 and became an infantry lieutenant. Attracted to airplanes early on, he transferred to the Aeronautical Division in 1911. In World War I he was promoted to colonel but did not serve overseas. In 1935 Brig. General Arnold became the assistant chief of the U.S. Army Air Corps and, three years later, the chief. In 1941 Lt. General Arnold took command of the Army Air Forces and in 1943 received the temporary rank of general (four stars). In 1944 he formed the Twentieth Air Force, a global strategic bombing force flying B-29 bombers. In December of that year he was one of four army generals promoted to the five-star rank of general of the army. Arnold retired to his farm near Sonoma, California, in 1946. Then, in 1949, he became general of the air force. He died in 1950 at the age of 64.

Military historian R. Ernest Dupuy wrote that Arnold "was the archpriest of air power. It was his concept which brought his Army Air Forces to become the mightiest striking arm of aerial warfare ever seen, founded on his simple simile of "a three-legged stool - pilots, planes and airfields." His slogan was "Keep 'em flying." Dupuy, *Compact History*, p. 249; Webster's Military Biographies. Also see Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier, A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960), pp. 157-158, for a delightful portrait of the young man. Arnold's autobiography, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949) describes his military career.

H. Smith departed from the Presidio on October 8 headed for New York. The test was not a success. Distance, weather, and malfunctioning all contributed to failure. Only nine men finished the test while nine others died in the attempt. Among those killed was Maj. Dana H. Crissy, the commander of Mather Field, California, another of the Western Department's airfields. Major Crissy had served in the Coast Artillery at the Presidio at the same time as his brother Myron, who had released the bombs at the air show in 1911. Dana had transferred to the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps in 1917. Dana flew a DeHavilland DH-4 from the Presidio in the east-bound group. While landing at Salt Lake City the plane stalled, crashed, and killed the pilot and his observer, Sgt. 1st Class V. Thomas.⁹

Crissy died at age thirty-five. The funeral service took place in the Presidio chapel, "Maj. D. H. Crissy, Aviation Corps, who fell to his death at Salt Lake City last Wednesday, while competing in the aerial derby, will be buried with full military honors in the Presidio [National Cemetery] at 2:30 this afternoon [October 14, 1919]. All of the troops will turn out to act as escort." Among the pallbearers was Colonel Arnold. Later, as the airfield took shape, Arnold called it Crissy Field even before it was dedicated. And so it came to be called.¹⁰

About the time Arnold became department air officer, an old acquaintance, Maj. Carl A. "Tooe" Spaatz, became his assistant at the Santa Fe Building. Characteristic of pilots, Spaatz felt more at ease in the air than sitting behind a desk. He too participated in the First Transcontinental Reliability and Endurance Test, flying west to east in December 1919. The War Department commended him for his achievements in that event. He was the winner on elapsed time; he placed second in the DH-4 class of aircraft; and he placed third in all types of aircraft.¹¹

9. Haller, *The Last Word*, p. 15.

10. Some blamed Crissy's death to his lack of experience. He had been in the Signal Corps for two years, had served as commandant of the School of Military Aeronautics at Princeton University, and had organized the Army's Aeronautical Ground School in World War I. *San Francisco Examiner*, October 14, 1919; Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 16-17.

11. Carl Spaatz added the second "a" to his name in 1937 in a failed effort to have people call him "spaatz" instead of "spatz", a gentleman's clothing fad at that time. Spaatz graduated from West Point in 1914 and accepted a commission in the Infantry. Following a tour in Hawaii he began aviation training at San Diego in 1915. In World War I he commanded the 31st Aero Squadron in France where in three weeks of combat he shot down three enemy planes. Promoted to temporary major in 1918, he was assigned to the Western Department in 1919. In 1920 both he and Arnold reverted to their Regular Army ranks of captain. Because of his combat experience Spaatz was promoted to permanent major in July 1920, thus outranking Arnold, his boss. To ease the situation Spaatz transferred to the command of Mather Field near Sacramento.

In 1920 the City and County of San Francisco leased land east of the Presidio, an area later known as the Marina, for use as an airfield for the Post Office Department's new Air Mail Service. At the same time the Post Office requested permission to land at the Presidio and to erect temporary facilities there. Although the Army gave permission an air mail service hangar was not erected until a year or two later.¹²

In September 1920 Flight A, 91st Observation Squadron, Air Service, under the command of Lt. Lowell Smith, arrived at the landing strip in the lower Presidio on temporary duty. The planes proceeded to spot hits for the coast artillery firing at distant targets in the ocean. At that time the Army reorganized the Western Department as the Ninth Corps Area. General Liggett moved his headquarters from downtown San Francisco to the Presidio's three-story cavalry barracks, 35. Arnold's office moved also but he found the new facility to be somewhat overcrowded.¹³

The buildings at the landing field having reached completion, the construction quartermaster turned over the facilities at Crissy Field to the U.S. Army Air Service on June 24, 1921. Maj. Gen. William M. Wright, who took command of the Ninth Corps Area on July 1, accompanied by Major Arnold, formally opened the Air Coast Defense Station, Crissy Field.¹⁴

Most of Crissy's buildings were located at the west end of the field under the bluffs of Fort Point. The *enlisted men's barracks*, 650, contained a mess hall. The stucco-covered brick building cost \$165,000. H-shaped and with a center rear wing of one story, the three story building had Spanish Colonial Revival

(..continued)

He served in a variety of positions in army air and in army schools. Promoted to brigadier general in 1940, he became the chief of Air Staff under Arnold who then was chief of Army Air Forces. In World War II he successively commanded Eighth Air Force in England, U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe, Allied Northwest African Air Forces, Strategic Air Force Europe, and Strategic Air Force Pacific (atomic bombs). In 1946 Spaatz succeeded Arnold as commander in chief, Army Air Forces and in 1947 became the first chief of staff of the new U.S. Air Force. He retired in 1948 with the rank of general (four stars). Spaatz died at Washington, D.C. in 1974. McHenry, *Webster's Biography*; Thomas M. Coffee, *HAP, Military Aviator, The Story of the U.S. Air Force and the Man who Built It*, General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold (New York: Viking, 1982), pp. 104-105; O. Westover, December 29, 1919, to C. Spatz - a document received from Historian Haller.

12. Haller, *The Last Word*, p. 39; Reuther, "Crissy Field," pp. 2-4.

13. Coffee, *Hap*, p. 104; Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 17-18; Reuther, "Crissy Field."

14. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 3 and 25; Thompson, *Special History*, p. 144. Crissy Field's first commanding officer, Maj. George H. Brett, did not arrive at San Francisco with October. The date of the formal ceremony has not been established.

features. Two-story verandas were located on the north end and west sides. Red mission tile covered the roof.¹⁵

Administration building, 651. Cost, \$52,500. Stucco-covered hollow tile walls. Dimensions 59 feet by 130 feet, two and one-half stories. Mission tile roof. Spanish Colonial Revival in design. Crissy Field headquarters occupied the ground floor and Major Arnold moved his offices into the second floor.

Guardhouse, 654. Cost, \$11,000. One story, 31 feet by 37 feet. Stucco-covered hollow tile walls. Spanish Colonial Revival features.

Noncommissioned officers' quarters. Three duplexes, 1263, 1266, and 1270 on Ruckman Avenue, Fort Winfield Scott. Stucco covered walls. Mission tile roofs.

Crissy Field's officers' quarters were located on the bluff above the field, along Lincoln Boulevard.

Bachelor officers' quarters, 951. The two and a half story building, 57 feet by 153 feet, cost \$64,500. Quarters of two rooms each for eighteen officers. Stucco-covered hollow tile walls on a wood frame. Mission tile roof. It had a central portico with four tuscan columns.

Officers' quarters, 952-964. Thirteen cottages costing \$8,900 each. Two story, stucco-covered concrete walls, each building 35 feet by 42 feet. Mission tile roofs. Spanish Colonial Revival in design.

Garages, 968 and 969. Two garages located on Hoffman Street, each with a capacity of eight vehicles. One story, wood frame, concrete.

Radio receiving station, 966. Cost, \$8,600. Stucco-covered hollow tile walls and mission tile roof. Dimensions 32 feet by 47 feet. It was too distant from the field for efficient operation and the radio system was moved down to the field. The building then became an officer's quarters.

15. This and the following building descriptions are taken from Harrison, *Presidio Physical History*, vols. 6 and 7, and National Park Service *Presidio of San Francisco, Presidio National Register of Historic Places Registration Forms*, [San Francisco: National Park Service], 1993.

Garage, 920. Built at a cost of \$33,000. One story, concrete walls on a steel frame. It measured 67 feet by 122 feet and maintained Crissy's large fleet of motor vehicles.

Two *hangers*, 926 and 937. One for landplanes (926), one for seaplanes (937). Cost, \$67,800 each and each measuring 112 feet by 161 feet. Industrial design.

Gas pump house, 929. One story, 12 feet by 12 feet. Cost, \$1,000. Concrete with a wood frame addition.

Armorer's storage, 931. One story, concrete, measuring 20 feet by 30 feet. Cost, \$8,900.

Dope shop and boiler house, 933. One and two stories, steel frame, measuring 60 feet by 232 feet. Cost, \$91,600. Industrial design.

Motor testing building, 934. Cost, \$17,700. Two story, stucco-covered concrete building, measuring 48 feet by 64 feet.

Aero storehouse, 935. One and one half story, reinforced concrete, 60 feet by 62 feet. Cost \$31,200.

Grease rack, 945.

Flagstaff. Located in front of the guardhouse. No longer extant.

Seaplane ramp. Concrete.

Landing strip. The early landing strip was a rather short stretch of ground extending eastward from the hangars for a distance of 2,000 feet, to the point where the old roadways and foundations of North Cantonment intruded onto the landing field approach.

Major Arnold approved of all the new facilities except the officers' quarters, "The Officers Quarters . . . are so small and so inadequate for the needs of officers that they should never be duplicated under any circumstances." When France's Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the Allied supreme commander in France in 1918, visited San Francisco in 1921, he inspected Crissy Field declaring it to be, "Le dernier mot en

champs d' aviation," (the last word in airfields).¹⁶

Crissy Field's garrison in 1921 consisted of the 91st Squadron (Observation), the 15th Aerial Photographic Section, and, temporarily, the 11th and 24th Balloon Companies who assisted the garrison in landscaping and beautifying the new field. Later that year a unit of the U.S. Air Reserve, the 316th Reserve Squadron (Observation), was organized at Crissy. This outfit met on Monday nights and alternate weekends for training and flying. All volunteers, these Reservists received no pay for their efforts. As time passed many dropped out and the unit experienced difficulty in maintaining full strength.¹⁷

The first commanding officer of the field, Maj. George H. Brett, like Arnold and Spaatz, belonged to the small group of army aviators who were destined to become leaders of the U.S. Army Air Corps. A graduate of the Virginia Military Institute he joined the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps in 1916. In 1939 he became the assistant chief of the Air Corps and in 1941 arrived in England to coordinate air power issues. An excellent administrator and supply expert, Lt. General Brett arrived in Australia in 1942 to organize military operations there. He participated in General MacArthur's escape from Corregidor and succeeded in getting Flying Fortresses to Mindanao to rescue the general and his family. MacArthur, however, had a disdain for non-combat officers and Brett suffered as a result.¹⁸

Brett quickly organized the garrison and in a letter to Washington set forth Crissy Field's missions:

1. To furnish observation, day and night, for artillery practice carried on monthly in the Coast Defenses of San Francisco.
2. To furnish photographic ships for the 15th Aerial Photographic Section.

16. Haller, *The Last Word*, p. 20; Dupuy, *Military Biography*, calls Foch France's finest soldier of the twentieth century.

17. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 45-47; Reuther, "Crissy Field," p. 3; Maurer, *Aviation*, pp. 88-92. College students enrolled in the ROTC also trained at Crissy. And in 1923 the 447th Reserve Squadron (Pursuit) organized at the field.

18. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 39-41 and 116; William Manchester, *American Caesar, Douglas MacArthur, 1880-1964* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), pp. 243, 255, and 273. Following Australia Brett commanded the U.S. Army, Caribbean. He retired in 1946.

3. To furnish airplanes for special missions authorized by the Chief, U.S. Army Air Service, such as photographic cross country trips to obtain educational films for various news weeklies.
4. To furnish airplanes for the flying officers, Headquarters, Ninth Corps Area.
5. To participate in various Air Service exhibits in connection with educational campaigns carried on by the air officer, Ninth Corps Area.¹⁹

Beginning in 1921 and continuing for the life of Crissy Field, Crissy's airmen carried out these missions with great success. In the autumn of 1921 a Crissy aircraft observed the target practice of the great 12-inch guns of Battery Spencer at Fort Baker – ten shots at distances greater than 10,000 yards. The plane was able to check with terrestrial observers by radio to determine within a few yards the shots' impact with relation to the target. In that first season a Crissy aircraft flew Professor Bailey Willis, president of the Seismological Society of America, the length of the San Andreas fault, observing and photographing the earthquake rift. The field furthered interest in military air by hosting a "Flying Circus" complete with stunt flying and parachute jumps. Twenty thousand citizens came to watch. Annually the 91st Observation Squadron dispatched aircraft to the National Forests during fire season to spot for fires all over the western states. The plans also mapped bug-infested areas and surveyed road construction in the forests.

Fulfilling a request from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Crissy's 15th Aerial Photographic Section carried out aerial photography in the western states, including the cities of Seattle, Tacoma, Everett, Bellingham, Grays Harbor, Vancouver, Portland, and Astoria. The U.S. Department of the Interior asked the airmen to photograph such landmarks as Lassen Volcanic and Yosemite national parks. Major Brett and two of his pilots explored the crater of the volcanic Lassen Peak by air in 1924. Northern California's Lassen, although quiet at the time, had been volcanic as recently as 1921. Major Brett's plane, while swooping in and out the crater, hit an air pocket that caused the craft to drop suddenly 2,000 feet. His companions thought the plane had crashed but were relieved to find him on the ground at the Red Bluff landing strip. A newspaper described the incident as "one of the most skillful yet daring bits of aviation thus far recorded in Western aeronautics." In addition to the coastal defenses of San Francisco Crissy

19. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 22-23.

aircraft cooperated in troop training at Camp Lewis, Washington, Fort MacArthur at Los Angeles, the Presidio of Monterey, and other western posts. Closer to home it carried out earthquake drills with the Presidio's 30th Infantry Regiment.

In 1926 the 91st Squadron participated in Joint Army-Navy maneuvers. Its planes discovered an "enemy" fleet approaching San Francisco and successfully alerted ground forces by radio, flares, and Very pistols. In 1930 a Crissy plane piloted by Lt. Edwin Bolzien flew Neil M. Judd, Smithsonian Institution, over Arizona's Salt River Valley so that he could survey prehistoric canals.²⁰

While Major Arnold had responsibilities for all army air activities in the eight western states that comprised the Ninth Corps Area, he was no "chairborne" administrator. In 1921 he entered a race against carrier pigeons from Portland, Oregon, to Crissy Field and won. Later, in 1934 he led a flight of B-10 bombers from Seattle to Alaska and return in a test of aerial resupply. But his time as headquarters air officer came to an end in the fall of 1922 when he returned to San Diego's Rockwell Field as it's commanding officer. Lt. Col. William E. Gillmore succeeded him at Ninth Corps headquarters.²¹

The 1919 Transcontinental Reliability and Endurance Test was but the first of a series of events that drew national attention to Crissy Field and to advances in aviation science. In September 1922 the huge American dirigible (zeppelin) C-2 made Crissy Field the final destination of her maiden transcontinental flight. An army band and a vast crowd welcomed her to San Francisco. Two years later the "From Dawn to Dusk" flight captured the nation's attention. To demonstrate that a plane and a pilot had the stamina to fly across the entire country in the light of one day and to dramatize the commercial possibilities resulting from such a feat, Lt. Russell L. Maughan prepared for the adventure. In 1923 he made two attempts, both ending in failure. Now, on June 23, just before dawn, 1924, his Curtiss PW-8 lifted off from Mitchell Field on Long Island. Twenty-one hours and forty-eight minute later he circled over San Francisco Bay. A fog made it difficult for him to determine ground features but when he saw Alcatraz Island's military prison's revolving light he got his bearings and dropped through the fog and landed his plane on the lit up landing strip to the roar of fifty thousand greeters. He had flown 2,670 miles making five stops. Already

20. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 23-24, 28, 42, 60, 64, and 71-72; unidentified San Francisco newspaper, January 21, 1924.

21. Goldberg, *U.S. Air Force*, p. 38; Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 33 and 45; Reuther, "Crissy Field." Crissy had army homing pigeons from 1922 to 1926. the loft was located immediately east of the barracks.

known for his aeronautical abilities Maughan now entered the annals of flight.²²

Also in 1924 international competition led to the "Round the World" circumnavigation of the globe by air. Four Douglas World Cruiser aircraft – *Seattle*, *New Orleans*, *Boston*, and *Chicago* – formed the American team. Lt. Lowell H. Smith, who had arrived at Crissy Field in 1920, commanded *Chicago*. The planes departed Seattle on April 6, 1924. When flagship *Seattle* crashed into a mountain in the Aleutians, Lieutenant Smith assumed the leadership. *Boston* sank into the Atlantic near the Faroe Islands between Iceland and Norway. The remaining two aircraft successfully circled the globe, visiting Japan, China, Thailand, India, Turkey, France, and Scotland. *Chicago* and *New Orleans*, accompanied by "*Boston II*," landed at Crissy Field to a rousing welcome on September 25 before proceeding on to Seattle to conclude a triumphant 26,345-mile flight. American aviation had reached another milestone.²³

In 1925 the U.S. Navy undertook to fly nonstop from San Francisco to Hawaii. The U.S. Army provided the services of Crissy Field for the naval seaplanes' preparations. First, however, the Army had to clear away sand from the little-used seaplane ramp. All being ready, two Naval Aircraft Factory PN9 seaplanes taxied to San Pablo Bay and lifted off on August 30 on the 2,100-mile journey. One plane was forced down 300 miles out and was towed back to San Francisco. The second PN9 almost reached Hawaii but had to settle on the ocean. Rescue boats reached the craft, rescued the crew, and towed the ship to Kawai.

In 1926 the U.S. Army Air Service became the U.S. Army Air Corps. While many of its leaders believed it should have complete independence, Congress retained it under the War Department. But the new name added prestige and, more importantly, Congress provided funds for a five-year expansion program. One of the early major undertakings of the Air Corps was its attempt to fly nonstop to Hawaii. Lts. Lester J. Maitland and Albert F. Hegenberger landed their Fokker C-2 monoplane at Crissy Field in 1927 for preliminary preparations. Because Crissy Field was too short for the fully-loaded Fokker, it lifted off from Oakland on June 28, 1927. Almost twenty-six hours later the plane landed at Wheeler Field outside Honolulu, having flown 2,400 miles. This flight marked the Air Corps' first attempt to use radio beacon

22. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 32 and 53; Reuther, "Crissy Field;" Maurer, *Aviation*, p. 185; Goldberg, *U.S. Air Force*, p. 34.

23. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 55-56; Reuther, "Crissy Field;" Mondey, *Pictorial History*, pp. 27-28. *Chicago* has been preserved at the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, while *New Orleans* is at the Air Force Museum, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.

navigation for a trans-oceanic flight.²⁴

Once Crissy Field became fully operational, additional construction took place. In addition to the Air Mail hangar's completion in January 1922, two more steel-frame hangars, located between the barracks and the Air Mail hangar, were built in 1922 and 1923. Adjacent to each other they were originally conceived as storehouses for air service material, but with the organization of Reserve units the buildings became classrooms, drill hall, and gymnasium for weekend and annual training. Joined together by a small office building in 1928, they became identified as one structure, 643. CRISSY FIELD was painted in large letters on their roofs. Air Mail operations ended at Crissy in 1926 and two years later its hangar was converted to barracks for ROTC students. A small latrine, 641, was constructed near it.

Married officers and their families continued to find their quarters terribly small and crowded. Some relief came in 1922 when a bedroom was added to the rear. A servant's room was added to each set in 1928. And the front porch was glassed in to become a "lounge."²⁵

When the 91st Squadron first arrived at San Francisco, it flew DeHavilland DH-4B aircraft, surplus from the Great War. In 1925 seven Douglas O-2, replaced an equal number of the DH-4Bs. A heavier aircraft, the O-2 could tow targets much more satisfactorily. The Reserve units meanwhile trained on JNS-1 "Jennies," also left over from the war. In 1933 Crissy's air force amounted to twenty-three aircraft, including observation planes, a transport, a photographic plane, and a trainer. Two years later when the War Department began planning to close the field and the Coast Artillery activities had greatly declined from a lack of funds, Crissy Field had only five airplanes.²⁶

Colonel Arnold had requested the removal of buildings in the adjacent North Cantonment as early as 1919. By 1926 all of the cantonment's structures as well as the exposition's Oregon Building had disappeared and the eastern end of the area contained only a polo field for the Presidio's garrison. During these years efforts continued to improve the field's "landing mat" or runway. In 1924 Ninth Corps Area

24. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 57-58 and 64-65; Mondey, *Pictorial History*, pp. 29-32.

25. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 41-42 and 68; Harrison, *Presidio Physical History*, vol. 7; Thompson, *Special History*, p. 144; National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Registration Forms.

26. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 69, 71, and 118.

planned to widen the field by dredging and filling. It also hoped to have the coast guard station moved elsewhere. But neither concept came to fruition.

In 1926 the Quartermaster Department's construction quartermaster undertook to improve the flying field. He leveled it, applied a heavy coating of clay, rolled it, then topped it with loam and seeded it with grass. All drains were cleaned and new drains added. The City and County of San Francisco contributed the clay free of cost. The loam came from the Presidio. Costs amounted to \$14,133 for labor and \$4,674 for materials. An *Air Service News Letter* described the field as then being 5,600 feet long by 400 feet wide.²⁷

Although Crissy Field's future was in doubt, it benefited considerably from the Great Depression's Works Progress Administration's programs in the 1930s. Three projects – landscaping, painting, and resurfacing and landscaping – took place.

Landscaping – Filling in low areas; constructing roads, parking areas, garages, and playground; landscaping in vicinity of officers' and noncommissioned officers' quarters; landscaping and fire prevention work around flying field; and construction of two double tennis courts, one in rear of officers' quarters and one east of the barracks.

Painting – Steel brushing and painting buildings; painting yellow and black checkerboard on roofs of the two hangars 926 and 937; and painting obstructions and boundary lights at the field.

Resurfacing runway and landscaping – Resurfacing 400,000 square feet of landing runway; constructing a six-foot woven wire fence around east and south sides of Crissy Field; and landscaping the area adjacent to the Golden Gate Bridge highway approach (Doyle Drive).

The "resurfacing" project was, in fact, the construction of an all-weather landing mat, 2,000 feet by 200 feet. It consisted of seven inches of crushed rock as a base, covered with a coat of leveling rock rolled

27. E.D. Russ, December 29, 1926, to CO, PSF, OCE, RG 77, NA; Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 47-48 and 61. The figure 5,600 feet apparently included the polo field, which was prohibited to planes except in an emergency. A Department of Commerce "Aerial Bulletin" in 1928 described the field as being 3,050 feet in length.

and packed, and topped with an inch and a half of natural rock asphalt, rolled and packed.²⁸

Like the Presidio of San Francisco, Crissy Field received visits from Washington officials. The year 1923 witnessed the arrival of the chief of the Army Air Service, Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick (who had recently learned to fly) in April, and an inspection of the field by the Secretary of War John W. Weeks a month later.²⁹ Major Brett commanded the field during these visits but he transferred a year later, in 1924. Maj. Delos C. Emmons, once an infantry lieutenant at the Presidio, succeeded Brett as commander, remaining at Crissy until 1928. Others followed: Maj. Gerald C. Brant in 1928; Maj. Lawrence W. McIntosh in 1931; Maj. Michael F. Davis, 1932; Maj. Donald P. Muse, 1933; and Maj. Floyd E. Galloway, in 1936.³⁰

At the time of Crissy's establishment flying was still a dangerous, if exciting, occupation. In the twelve months between June 1920 and June 1921, 330 crashes occurred in the Air Service, killing sixty-nine officers and severely injuring twenty-seven others. Crissy Field's crash rate for its first ten years averaged eight per year. Its first fatality, however, did not occur until 1928 when a Reserve officer crashed into San Francisco Bay. Not all accidents occurred in the air. In 1933 fire broke out in the gasoline pumphouse, 929, and five men received serious injuries. Fireman succeeded in preventing the fire from spreading to nearby gasoline storage tanks.³¹

Crissy Field became only marginally involved in the Air Corps' disastrous attempt to deliver air mail in 1934. Unhappy with the air mail system, President Franklin D. Roosevelt in early 1934 directed the

28. Mooser, *Works Program in San Francisco*, items 2170, 2174, and 4300, pp. 83 and 88; Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 76-77. Historian Haller provided the extracts from Mooser's report.

29. Haller, *The Last Word*, p. 43; Dupuy, et al, *Military Biography*. General Patrick, a graduate of West Point, had served in the Corps of Engineers until World War I. In France Pershing made him commander of the combined air service of the American Expeditionary Force. In 1921 he became chief of the Air Service. He campaigned successfully for the reorganization of the Air Service as the Air Corps in 1926. Apparently, General Pershing accompanied Patrick on this trip.

30. Brett and Emmons' military careers have already been outlined. Gerald Brant became a major general in World War II in charge of the Air Corps' Training Corps in 1944. Michael F. Davis, promoted to brigadier general in World War II, served as deputy commander of the 10th and 12th Air Forces, 1947-1950, retiring from the Air Force in 1950. Brig. Gen. Floyd Galloway transferred to the Air Force when it was established. No further information has been gleaned for Major Muse. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 116-117; *Army Almanac*; *Webster's Military Biographies*.

31. Monney, *Pictorial History*, p. 26; Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 68-69 and 75.

Postmaster-General James A. Farley to cancel all existing air mail contracts. Roosevelt then asked the chief of the Air Corps, Maj. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois, if his pilots could take over the task. Foulois said yes and he choose fourteen main routes covering some 13,000 air miles and he allocated 500 men and aircraft to the task. The weather that winter was worse than usual with fierce storms sweeping the nation. Almost immediately the Air Corps suffered two crashes causing three fatalities. More crashes followed. Within three weeks nine flyers lost their lives. The public became thoroughly alarmed. Eighty days later the government cancelled the Air Corps' further participation. On May 8 a report noted that a B-10 bomber departed Crissy Field on the last Air Corps coast-to-coast mail run, arriving at Newark, New Jersey, fourteen hours later. Thus ended "the most ill-fated peacetime venture in the history of the Air Corps." But out of the tragedy came the realization that the U.S. Army Air Corps' aircraft and equipment demanded modernization.³²

Beginning in the early 1930s talk began within the Air Corps that Crissy Field might be closed. In 1933 the commanding officer, Major Muse, reported that due to poor workmanship and the blasting from the Golden Gate Bridge construction, the field's buildings were deteriorating. The coast guard station continued to interfere with operations and the new bridge increased the hazard to flyers. In 1935 the War Department developed plans to close the field citing the poor percentage of flying days, the construction of the new Hamilton Field in Marin County, and the reopening of other fields in California. A congressional delegation visited Crissy and it too recommended abandonment.

A few months before the closing of the field, the U.S. Department of Commerce published a description of Crissy Field as it existed on January 1, 1936:

San Francisco – Crissy Field, Army. One mile E. of Golden Gate along shores of San Francisco Bay. Lat. 37°48'; long. 122°28'. Alt. 8 feet. Irregular, 5200 by 400 feet, 2-way field, sandy loam, level, artificial drainage. Landing mat 2,000 by 200 feet in center of field. CRISSY FIELD on hangar. [Golden Gate Bridge] Tower, 750 feet high, 1¼ miles NW, obstruction lighted; buildings to E. and SE; hills to SW and W. Boundary, obstruction, and landing area flood lights. Servicing facilities day and night. For civilian use only on special arrangements. Teletypewriter.³³

32. Mondey, *Pictorial History*, pp. 37-39; Maurer, *Aviation*, p. 299; Goldberg, *U.S. Air Force*, p. 39; Reuther, "Crissy Field," p. 5. Only Reuther stated that the aircraft was a B-10 bomber.

33. U.S. Department of Commerce, *Descriptions of Airports*, January 1, 1936, p. 26.

After Crissy Field closed, the Presidio's garrison, then consisting primarily of the 30th Infantry Regiment, took over the lower Presidio, fulfilling Major Harts' dream of 1907 by employing the area as a drill field and training area. Presidio post headquarters along with the 30th Infantry's headquarters moved into the former airfield's administration building, 651. During World War II the Fourth Army Intelligence School (the Japanese-language school) occupied the former Air Mail hangar, 640, for six months in 1941-1942.

By the end of the war the U.S. Army had some 2,000 light aircraft assigned to most combat organizations for courier, liaison, photographic, reconnaissance, column control, and emergency supply missions. When the U.S. Air Force was separated from the U.S. Army in 1947, this type of aviation remained with the Army. Following the Korean War the Army had around 5,000 aircraft, either fixed or rotary wing. At Crissy Field the Army employed these aircraft during that war for liaison and medical purposes.

In the late 1950s the field became known as Crissy Army Airfield. A steel and glass tower, fifty-two feet high, was moved to Crissy in 1958 for air traffic control. In 1959 the landing mat was repaved and a rip-rap seawall protected the shoreline. A large engineer field maintenance building, 924, was constructed at that time. A 1959 description stated that the flexible pavement runway measured 2,500 feet by 50 feet. A year later the runway was extended to 3,100 feet, stripped, graded, and paved with two inches of thick bituminous concrete over six inches of crushed aggregate base. The field's mission in the 1950s included the operation and maintenance of light army aircraft in the support of army activities in the Sixth U.S. Army area of operations; the maintenance and housing of helicopters used in support of the Air Defense Missile Bases (Nike) in the Bay Area; a training site for army reservists (Harmon Hall); and a base for the San Francisco Police Department's helicopters.³⁴

In 1959 Crissy was authorized sixteen military aircraft. In addition the Presidio Flying Club, organized in 1957, and the Civil Air Patrol maintained eight civilian aircraft at the field. In February 1960 the *Star Presidian* published a photo showing how army buses were used as revetments to protect the planes from a fierce windstorm. That same year the 51st Engineer Company began removing World War II temporary buildings from Letterman's Crissy Annex in Area A to provide an additional approach zone for landing

34. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. viii and 96-97; National Park Service, *Collection of Historical Source Materials*, p. 277; Anon, "Section IV, History," undated, Fort Point and Presidio Historical Association; Voucher File, FY 1959-1960, Master Plans, PSF.

aircraft. In 1967 the Presidio wanted to remove more Area A buildings but Letterman Hospital refused to let them go as long as the war in Vietnam lasted. Crissy Army Airfield made only a limited contribution to the Vietnam war in that aircraft were used to airlift wounded military personnel from Travis Air Force Base to Letterman. Echoes from the past reached Crissy in 1961 when Hap Arnold's son, Col. Henry H. Arnold, Jr., arrived at Sixth U.S. Army headquarters as the new deputy information officer.³⁵

In 1972 the Golden Gate National Recreation Area was established in the Bay Area. The U.S. Army permitted a portion of the shoreline at the field to the Interior Department. Before long the public urged that the field be closed to aircraft and the area opened to recreational activity. In October the Army's Chief of Engineers recommended that Crissy be converted to a heliport only. At midnight February 14, 1974, Crissy Army Airfield was officially closed. A month later it was redesignated "Army Heliport," to be used only for very important persons (VIPS) and medevac aircraft. Helicopters continued to land at the Presidio of San Francisco's heliport in 1994, seventy-five years since it first had airplanes.³⁶

The *Last Word in Airfields* summarized the historical significance of the Presidio of San Francisco's Crissy Field:

The first air coast defense station on the West Coast and the only such in the United States remaining intact.

The only army air base in the western United States on continuous active duty from 1919 to 1936.

The site of numerous aviation firsts in the 1920s, an important decade called "aviation's adventuring years."

Its service to other government agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Geological Service, and the Smithsonian Institution.

35. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 96 and 99; *The Star Presidian*, February 12 and July 29, 1960, and January 20, 1961.

36. Haller, *The Last Word*, pp. 98-99; Voucher Files 1973-1974 and Fiscal Year 1974, Master Plans, PSF.

Its training of Reserve personnel and stimulating an interest in flying among civilians.

The oldest extant airfield in the Bay Area and the early terminus for the U.S. Air Mail Service.

And for its association with such great military leaders as Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Carl A. "Tooey" Spaatz, George H. Brett, and Delos C. Emmons.³⁷

In less than half a century, from the first U.S. military airplane developed by the Wright brothers in 1909 to the massive military air operations of World War II, United States air power became an essential element in the nation's defenses. For a time within those decades, from 1920 to 1936, Crissy Field contributed to the development of air operations, both military and civilian, in the ways set forth in *The Last Word in Airfields*.

37. Haller, *The Last Word*.